

understanding

**CHRISTIAN
PRIVILEGE**

*Managing the Tensions of
Spiritual Plurality*

BY TRICIA SEIFERT

Bucolic chapels, Sundays off, and breaks at Christmas are regular reminders that much of American higher education was founded by Christians who transferred their faith's traditions from the church to the campus. As colleges and universities become increasingly diverse, inclusiveness means making room for the spiritual practices of all.

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH has gradually but persistently helped educators learn to recognize and appreciate multiple dimensions of students' identities, including those of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. These dimensions, however, are not the only elements of student identity. In *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education*, Elizabeth Tisdell details the intersections between students' gendered, racial, ethnic, and spiritual identities and asserts that students' spirituality as a dimension of their learning warrants greater attention. Peter Laurence, director of the Education as Transformation Project, explains in a 1999 *About Campus* article how spiritual development supports the twenty-first-century goals of higher education. He notes, "Students are in the process of discovering what it means to be in community as they also develop their own worldviews. Students who develop a sense of [religious] pluralism during this critical time of their development can later play a key role in the building of a more stable and inclusive civil society" (p. 13).

If contemporary education is to include holistic learning and development of citizen leaders, students must not be treated as disembodied intellects but as whole people whose minds "cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul," according to Parker Palmer in his article "Evoking the Spirit in Public Education" (p. 10). This combination of feeling, spirit, and mind—a foundation of the student affairs profession—is often framed as dimensions of holistic student learning. Research on learning indicates that what and how students feel affects not only how they view themselves and how they interact with others but what they know and believe to be true. Spiritual development, which bridges the affective and cognitive, contributes to the three capacities that embody learning and liberal education, which Martha Nussbaum details in *Cultivating Humanity*. These capacities include "critical examination of oneself and one's traditions, understanding the ways in which common needs and aims are differently realized in different circumstances, and the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself" (pp. 9–11).

As a facet of learning and a means to accomplish the larger goals of higher education, spiritual development is important for students of all faiths. One obstacle that can get in the way of this development is *Christian privilege*—the conscious and subconscious advantages often afforded the Christian faith in America's colleges and universities. In this article, I suggest that Christian privilege must be acknowledged and dismantled before environments truly conducive to spiritual development for all can be created. Christian privilege—as well as other kinds of privilege—

hinders the development of all students. It may forestall or foreclose Christian students' critical examination of themselves and their own traditions while simultaneously stifling non-Christian students' expression of their spiritual identity. Helping students recognize the existence of Christian privilege and how it impinges on learning is an important first step in managing both the subtle and apparent tensions that exist on a spiritually plural campus and in openly exploring the ethical and existential questions important to life in the twenty-first century. With that recognition, the higher education community can begin to create spaces for dialogue in which non-Christian and Christian students alike feel free to openly share and learn with others. My intent in writing this article is to help start a community dialogue about how to manage spiritually plural campus environments, beginning with a definition of Christian privilege and examples of student experiences. I conclude with recommendations for applying specific principles in order to create communities of dialogue on individual campuses.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE?

ALTHOUGH the religious ties of many institutions have been substantially relaxed in the past 150 years, a Christian ethos continues to permeate many campus cultures. For example, the end-of-term break at colleges and universities began and, for many, continues as a break so that students can celebrate Christmas. A chapel often graces the grassy quadrangle of a public or private college or university, and the overwhelming presence of Christianity at American institutions maintains it as the spiritual norm on campus. These cultural markers alienate those from non-Christian faith traditions and those who are agnostic or atheist, subtly designating them as "other." Those within the spiritual norm gain a level of privilege that is often unconscious. Adapting Peggy McIntosh's white privilege and male privilege framework, Christine Clark, Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Lewis Schlosser, and Craig Alimo developed several examples of Christian privilege. In an article in *Multicultural Education*, Clark and her colleagues define privilege as the manifestation of unearned and unacknowledged advantages that those in the dominant social or cultural group (in this case, Christians) experience in their everyday lives. Examples of Christian privilege offered by Clark and her colleagues include the following: the improper actions of one person are not attributed to all people from a religious group, the mass media represents one's religion widely and positively, and state and federal holidays likely coincide with one's religious practices.

Christian privilege must be acknowledged and managed before environments truly conducive to spiritual development for all can be created.

EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE plays a role in the formal structures and informal norms of higher education institutions. Christian students experience formal privilege in the institution's calendar, physical facilities, and on-campus dining options. In addition, Christian students experience ceremonial traditions, language, dress, and assumptions (for example, charity is regarded as "good Christian behavior") as functions of informal privilege. These everyday mechanisms, which privilege Christian students, are exclusionary of the traditions of non-Christians and illustrate the general advantage that Christian students hold in regard to educational policy and practices. At the same time, this privilege shortchanges the learning of Christians if they are not asked to critically examine the beliefs that are so thoroughly represented in formal and informal aspects of campus life.

The Christian Foundation of America's Colleges and Universities. The formal structure of the work calendar is perhaps the most evident feature of Christian privilege. It is not by chance that the work week is set from Monday through Friday, with Sunday designated as the day of rest. Nor is it coincidence that one of the major holidays on which most public and private businesses are closed is Christmas, one of the central Christian holidays. Clark and her colleagues explain that because Christian students can say that "the central figure of my religion is used as the major point of reference for my calendaring system" (p. 54), they are experiencing Christian privilege.

Lewis Schlosser and William Sedlacek, in a 2003 issue of *About Campus*, note that the timing of the term break at Christmas—which often goes unquestioned—privileges Christian students, who do not have to choose between their schoolwork and attending religious ceremonies, while it marginalizes non-Christian students, who must negotiate conflicts between their studies and their spiritual observances. For example, in some years, Ramadan—one of the key religious observances of

Islam—may coincide with many campuses' midterm exams. The perceived secularization of Christmas has helped to reinforce its position as central to the college and university calendar. The suggestion that Santa Claus and a Christmas tree are devoid of religious connotations and are "just part of the culture" (p. 124), as Douglas Hicks notes in *Religion and the Workplace: Pluralism, Spirituality, and Leadership*, cements Christian privilege. As Christian symbols are placed at the center of our institutions' cultural fabric, non-Christians are pushed further to the margins.

Despite federal law requiring reasonable accommodations for religious expression and observances, Clark and her colleagues as well as Schlosser and Sedlacek have observed that the "everyone is Christian" assumption often leads non-Christians to have to verify or document that their absences are associated with the observance of a spiritual event. In "My Grandmother and the Snake," Nicole Adams, a member of the Wenatchi Band of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, shares her experience of facing Christian privilege in attending to the death of a family member. Adams recounted, "[My teacher] had difficulty comprehending why it had taken me a week to travel home and take part in my grandmother's funeral. Because of her own cultural bias, she could not understand why I had not simply flown home, attended a service, then flown back to school. Taking an entire week was unnecessary and unheard of to her" (pp. 108–109). The senior-level administrator who taught Adams's first-year seminar class failed to recognize a facet of Christian privilege, which Clark and her colleagues identify as the unwillingness to learn the religious or spiritual customs of others.

Tricia Seifert is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Iowa. She studies the impact of educational programs and policies on student learning.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Marcia Baxter Magolda (aboutcampus@muohio.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

Having physical space in which to practice their religion can also be an area in which Christian students have privilege. Beth McMurtrie, in a 1999 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, noted that when secular institutions have made an effort to recognize the spiritual needs of students by providing space for religious and spiritual practice, it has often been in a lopsided manner in which “Christians end up with the prime real estate—perhaps a quaint campus chapel—while other religious groups make do with a room in the student center or the basement of a dormitory.” Although some institutions have tried to convert their Christian chapels into multifaith centers, they have faced obstacles. In *Religion in Higher Education: The Politics of the Multi-Faith Campus*, Sophie Gilliat-Ray quotes a chaplain who said, “The chapel is designed, fitted, and used for Christian worship. It would be strange to conceal the traces of its being inhabited in this way. Places of worship are identity-shaping” (p. 94).

In an effort to transform a chapel into a space appropriate for spiritual plurality, concealing the original design is often the best campuses can do. In McMurtrie’s article, Peter Laurence states, “Many colleges are so locked into architectural spaces, there’s no way that’s going to be changed.” Converting a Christian chapel into a physical space that invites a wide array of spiritual practices begins with garnering support for such a notion. This conversion can be difficult to sell.

Christian students have often been unwilling to cede their turf. In a recent *Journal of College Student Development* article on the culture of a Christian student organization, Peter Magolda and Kelsey Ebben describe how the question of turf is exacerbated when Christian students themselves believe that they are marginalized on campus. Because the academy is a culture of empiricism and rationalism, Christian students, driven by faith, may feel that the overall academic climate is hostile. Given this feeling, Christian students may be especially resistant to losing any space they do have. Their perception of a hostile academic climate, manifested in feelings of marginalization, may mask the unearned benefits they experience every day as Christians. These factors, combined with the feeling of threat that typically results when unacknowledged privilege is highlighted, make

Christian students’ resistance to sharing spiritual space more understandable.

The meal plan at most colleges and universities is another structure that tends to place Christianity at the center and other faith traditions at the margins. While Catholic students are virtually certain to find meatless entrees on Fridays, it is not a foregone conclusion that institutional dining halls follow kosher practices for the orthodox Jewish students on campus. Nor is it a certainty that Muslim students will find a dining hall open for *iftar* (the meal that breaks the daily Ramadan fast after sunset). When Gilliat-Ray discusses the issue of one university’s false claims of religiously sensitive food preparation, she raises an even broader question: To what extent are American colleges and universities providing for the diets of non-Christian students, especially first-year students who are required to live on campus and purchase a meal plan? Christianity as the spiritual norm, as well as the Christian privilege perpetuated by that norm, has so permeated the structures of American higher education that institutions frequently fail to consider how such structures exclude or at least do not fully include other faith traditions.

The Christian Norms That Pervade Our Learning Environments. Christian privilege also manifests itself through informal norms; traditions created and sustained by students, staff, and faculty often stem from Christian practices. For example, the non-denominational prayers at commencement and in pre-game locker room rituals tend to be based in Christianity. In a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, Clark and her colleagues as well as Peter Monaghan detailed the difficult position of non-Christian football players who have been obliged to participate in coach-sponsored prayer. In accordance with many institutional policies, unless a player directly affected by the prayer complains to the administration, no action can be taken to end the practice. Given the desire of young athletes to stay on a team, the likelihood of anyone stepping forward is slim. The practice of locker room prayer effectively puts non-Christian athletes in the position of having to suppress their spiritual identity for fear of forfeiting playing time or, worse, being cut from the team.

Christian cultural markers alienate those from non-Christian faith traditions and those who are agnostic or atheist, subtly designating them as “other.”

Christian privilege shortchanges the learning of Christians if they are not asked to critically examine the beliefs that are so thoroughly represented in formal and informal aspects of campus life.

The language that colleges and universities choose to use in regard to spiritual or religious organizations can communicate greater respect for some faith traditions than others. In an article in *Multicultural Education*, Clark and Brimhall-Vargas comment that at the University of Maryland at College Park, the Christian term *chaplain* was used to refer to some leaders of non-Christian faith traditions, including the Muslim imam. The use of Christian language to describe non-Christian faith leaders can marginalize leaders of non-Christian faith traditions.

Non-Christian students also face Christian privilege in regard to dress and personal grooming habits. The backlash after the events of September 11, 2001, may prevent non-Christian students from expressing their religious or spiritual identity. Many female Muslim students may wish to uphold their *fard* (religious duty) and wear the *hijab* (the Muslim head scarf) but do not do so because they regularly encounter Christian ignorance and discrimination against Muslim beliefs. To address this issue, the U.S. Department of Justice sent a letter (referenced in an issue of *Education Week*) on August 20, 2004, to all state departments of education asking for help in preventing discrimination against non-Christian religious and ethnic groups. In the letter, R. Alexander Acosta, assistant attorney general of the civil rights division, noted that his office had investigated 600 incidents of violence against Muslim, South Asian, and Sikh Americans. Some of the incidents were specifically directed at Muslim women wearing *hijab* or against Sikh males who, because of their beards, were accused of being members of the Taliban.

Christian privilege also underlies the assumptions made about the origin of valuable aspects of a culture. In his thought-provoking article "Enough Already: Universities Do Not Need More Christianity," David Hollinger notes that the overwhelming presence of Christianity in American higher education makes valid some claims among academics that a transfer of Christian culture to the academy has occurred. He further

argues, however, that the more general the cultural commodity, the more suspect the claim of Christian cultural transfer. For example, the notion that good behavior is Christian behavior and that a host of general virtues (for example, humility, generosity, charity, and decency) are the cultural purview of Christians reinforces the Christian privilege that Clark and her colleagues identify: "When told about the history of civilization, I can be sure that I am shown [that] people of my religion made it what it is" (p. 53).

The responsibility of educating the whole student includes creating a community in which all students feel safe to practice and share their spiritual beliefs and supported in learning about the spiritual beliefs of others. To create such a community, educators need to help students develop the ability and willingness to question educational practices and programs that privilege the spiritual identity development of one group over others. Students have made great strides in questioning other forms of privilege, such as male privilege and white privilege. The changing demographics of our college and university campuses and their increasing spiritual plurality necessitate a commitment to helping the campus community recognize and confront Christian privilege in the same way that it has confronted other forms of privilege.

ADDRESSING CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

ADDRESSING Christian privilege in higher education begins with supporting students through the challenging process of recognizing that it exists. Educators are responsible for supporting Christian students who may feel threatened by conversations about the privilege their faith carries and working with them through the process of reconstructing their notions about this privilege. While these conversations, if successful, will lead to an understanding that Christianity can no longer be assumed to be the norm, students should also come to believe that their

faith will continue to be respected. These conversations may occur in a workshop highlighted by compassionate listening and nonconfrontational communication designed to empower students to speak openly and to listen empathically to others. The White Privilege Conference (<http://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com>) offers a useful model for exploring and confronting Christian privilege. Taking advantage of teachable moments in daily interactions with students is another way to challenge and support them as they consider the consequences of Christian privilege.

Making procedural changes is another way to address Christian privilege. Such an initiative might include examining the academic calendar and official ceremonies for subtle and explicit reinforcement of Christian privilege. Removing *anno Domini* (A.D.) and replacing it with *common era* (C.E.) on diplomas would be a worthwhile place to begin. Campus facilities planning committees should be aware of the implicit messages in space allocation for the gatherings of spiritually based student organizations. Housing and dining services could be more flexible in providing living accommodations as well as meals for students with housing and dietary restrictions based on their non-Christian convictions, particularly if students are required to live on campus.

Helping students recognize and wrestle with privilege and making the practical and procedural steps suggested earlier are both necessary to dismantle Christian privilege. The final step is to create communities in which students can be exposed to spiritual differences and further develop the capacities that Nussbaum identifies: critical examination of one's own traditions, understanding the traditions of others, and the ability to take the perspective of another. Creation of these communities must follow, not precede changes in campus policies and procedures, or they run the risk of being viewed as window dressing or a hollow institutional gesture for the benefit of students who have traditionally felt marginalized. The challenges likely to be faced when an institution creates communities for spiritual dialogue and development can be mitigated by apply-

ing the principles offered by Hicks, which are discussed in the following section.

CREATING COMMUNITIES FOR SPIRITUAL EXAMINATION AND LEARNING

HICKS provides a foundation of three principles, or ground rules, for educators who wish to facilitate spiritually plural communities. The first principle, which states that all community members deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, is based on the fundamental claim that everyone is endowed with inviolable human dignity and is deserving of respect. The second and third principles hold that community membership must be voluntary and not coerced, even subtly. A violation of the third principle would be requiring students involved in disciplinary proceedings to choose between participation in the community and another sanction. The principle of non-coercion means that participation in the community cannot be used as an intervention to teach a lesson to students who have displayed disrespect or hostility toward others.

Parker Palmer's groundbreaking book *To Know as We Are Known* puts forward the notion of a "community of truth." To be in truth with, or beholden to, another is "to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship. [It is] a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks. . . . To know in truth is to allow one's self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings" (p. 31). In a community of truth, students, faculty, and staff are engaged in spiritual examination, learning, and development; they share their beliefs and learn about others' beliefs. Participants in such a community are aware that it is likely to challenge and change them and to modify, reaffirm, or strengthen their beliefs.

Following Hicks's fundamental principles as well as those involved in developing a community of truth is not easy. It requires students and other members of the campus community to recognize Christian privilege

The responsibility of educating the whole student includes creating a community in which all students feel safe to practice and share their spiritual beliefs and supported in learning about the spiritual beliefs of others.

Those whose privilege is being dismantled will be asked to see that their beliefs, while no longer the norm, are still respected.

and to question educational practices and policies that support it. It involves inviting Christian students to voice their feelings of marginalization and to begin the process of recognizing and later confronting their privilege and how it hinders their learning and the learning of others. Nonetheless, through this process, Christians can become allies and advocates for practices, policies, and communities that support the spiritual development of all students. Despite the difficulties, understanding and respecting one's own spiritual beliefs and those of others seems more necessary than ever in an era shaped by the events of September 11, 2001.

A process for developing understanding and respect for diverse spiritual beliefs was launched by the University of Maryland's Office of Human Relations Program (UMOHRP) as a result of negative feelings expressed by non-Christian office members about a holiday party. Such a triggering event is often the impetus for change on a college or university campus. In an article published in *Multicultural Education*, Clark details the process used by UMOHRP staff members to create a more inclusive work environment.

Just as Tisdell describes, the UMOHRP employees' identities intersected at multiple junctures of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, sexuality, and spiritual beliefs and were deeply influenced by oppression each member had experienced. In early dialogue, the UMOHRP group established that it was important to consciously be aware of the range of differences and chose to honor the complex identity of each office member. A collective decision was made that, regardless of difference, each person would be treated with dignity. In an informal conversation, the staff unanimously recommended to the director that the issues surrounding the holiday party be addressed. This consensus meant that staff members would be willing to join a conversation voluntarily and without coercion. Clark noted that conversations were often challenging and that discussion of one point often led to discussions of other sticking points. The group held together, in large part, by focusing not on the content of the conflict (the holiday

party) but on the process of communicating as a group. Through this process, they developed community learning norms, which included statements such as "Give others the benefit of the doubt" and "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p. 52).

Through the group process, members learned about each other's spiritual beliefs, struggles, and celebrations and examined their own beliefs. They were, as Palmer says, mutually accountable in the relationship. UMOHRP members explore questions about responsibility to others posed by Palmer, "Who is out there?" and "What does this encounter reveal about me?" (p. 60).

One organization that facilitates understanding among spiritually diverse students is the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) (<http://www.ifyc.org>). IFYC provides opportunities for youth from all spiritual traditions to come together, learn from each other, engage in service, and share how their faith and beliefs motivate them to serve the broader community. In his article "Inviting Atheists to the Table: A Modest Proposal for Higher Education," Robert Nash notes that many have argued that simple tolerance, respect, and celebration of spiritual diversity are not enough. Nash quotes Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, who contends that "we must engage, exchange, traffic, criticize, reflect, repair, and renew with those unlike ourselves. We must allow the 'other' to get under our skins, to engage with us, to disturb us, and even, if the circumstances warrant, to *change* us" (pp. 19–20; emphasis in original). These examples demonstrate how exchanging ideas, reflecting on our own beliefs, and renewing our personal commitments in light of new learning can help us manage a spiritually plural campus.

The University of Maryland's Office of Human Relations Program (OHRP) example could certainly be characterized by engagement, exchange, reflection, disturbance, and possible change. Clark reports that the holiday party conflict resolution resulted in the office creating new celebrations that honor all staff members' spiritual traditions. By struggling together, OHRP staff members highlight the reality of multicultural organi-

zational development. This is clearly a testament that engaging in a community of truth requires a commitment to life-long learning and is not a static destination. This work requires the fortitude to know that reflecting, repairing, and renewing are part of a cyclical process.

Higher education's current environment of dynamic change is ripe for dismantling Christian privilege. This kind of change will involve recognizing Christian privilege in its many forms and taking substantive action to dismantle it. Those whose privilege is being dismantled will be asked to see that their beliefs, while no longer the norm, are still respected. With this established, communities can be formed around conversations about spiritual differences, explorations of personal values, mutual learning, and spiritual and intellectual development.

NOTES

- Adams, N. (1997). My grandmother and the snake. In A. Garrod & C. Larimore (Eds.), *First person, first peoples: Native American college graduates tell their life stories* (pp. 93-114). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Clark, C. (2003). Diversity initiatives in higher education: A case study of multicultural organizational development through the lens of religion, spirituality, faith, and secular inclusion. *Multicultural Education, 10*, 48-54.
- Clark, C., & Brimhall-Vargas, M. (2003). Diversity initiatives in higher education: Secular aspects and international implications of Christian privilege. *Multicultural Education, 11*, 55-57.
- Clark, C., Brimhall-Vargas, M., Schlosser, L., & Alimo, C. (2002). It's not just "secret Santa" in December: Addressing educational and workplace climate issues linked to Christian privilege. *Multicultural Education, 10*, 52-57.
- Gilliat-Ray, S. (2002). *Religion in higher education: The politics of the multi-faith campus*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Hicks, D. (2003). *Religion and the workplace: Pluralism, spirituality, and leadership*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hollinger, D. (2002). Enough Already: Universities Do Not Need More Christianity. In A. Sterk (ed.), *Religion, Scholarship & Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects: Essays from the Lilly Seminar on Religion and Higher Education* (pp. 40-49). South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Laurence, P. (1999). Can religion and spirituality find a place in higher education? *About Campus, 4*(5), 11-16.
- Magolda, P., & Ebben, K. (2006). College student involvement and mobilization: An ethnographic study of a Christian student organization. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*, 281-298.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). *White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.
- McMurtrie, B. (1999, December 3). Pluralism and prayer under one roof. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved September 18, 2006, from <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v46/i15/15a04801.htm>
- Monaghan, P. (1992, November 11) Coach may have used position to promote religious views. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved September 18, 2006, from <http://chronicle.com/che-data/articles.dir/articles-39.dir/issue-12.dir/12a03501.htm>.
- Nash, R. J. (2003). Inviting atheists to the table: A modest proposal for higher education. *Religion & Education, 30*, 1-23.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Palmer, P. (1983). *To know as we are known*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Palmer, P. (1999). Evoking the spirit in public education. *Educational Leadership, 56*, 6-11.
- Schlosser, L. Z., & Sedlacek, W. (2003). Christian privilege and respect for religious diversity: Religious holidays on campus. *About Campus, 7*(6), 28-29.
- Tisdell, E. (2003). *Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Zehr, M. A. (2004). Justice department asks schools to fight post-9/11 bias. *Education Week, 24*(2), 34.

